

# White Paper

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**White Paper Report**

Grant Number: PW-228118-15  
Project Title: Uncovering Fabergé: An Archival Digitization Planning and Pilot Project  
Project Director: Stephen Bonadies  
Grantee Institution: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts  
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**Abstract**

In 2015, The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) received support from the National Endowment for the Humanities in the form of a Humanities Collections and Reference Resources Foundations grant of \$40,000 to develop a comprehensive plan to digitize and disseminate archival materials related to some of the museum's most significant holdings. The pilot project focused on the Lillian Thomas Pratt collection of Fabergé and Russian Decorative Arts and digitization of the related archives. VMFA was able to successfully develop the technical requirements and workflow for disseminating digitized archival content on the web, and design a framework to relate primary source materials to objects in the museum's art collection.

## **Project Background**

Although the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) has been creating archival material since its formation in 1934, the museum only hired its first part-time records manager/archivist to begin to manage those collections in 1996. Officially designated by museum policy in 2004, the VMFA Archives now contains over 2,000 linear feet of diverse and growing permanent materials, including institutional records, vertical files, and donated collections related to the museum and the history of art in Virginia. As the collections grew and the demand for digitized primary source materials increased, VMFA realized the need to hire a full-time Archivist and began the work of developing a comprehensive plan to digitize and disseminate archival materials related to some of the museum's most significant holdings.

VMFA identified the Lillian Thomas Pratt collection of Fabergé and Russian Decorative Arts and the related archives for the pilot digitization project because of the direct relationship between the archival materials to art objects in the VMFA collection, and because of its popularity with researchers. During her lifetime, Pratt purchased most of her Fabergé collection from the Schaffer Collection and Hammer Galleries, both of New York City, in the 1930s and 1940s. As her collection grew, so did her records of correspondence, invoices, price tags, and detailed item descriptions. Upon her death in 1947, Lillian Thomas Pratt bequeathed to the museum both the archival documents detailing the formation of her collection, as well as the objects themselves. Today, the Pratt collection includes more than 400 Russian objects, including five Imperial Easter Eggs and approximately 170 additional works from the House of Fabergé, and consistently remains one of the great highlights of the VMFA permanent collection.

Digitization of the Pratt archives would allow the museum to not only make the collector's documents more readily available, but also connect the archival materials to the art objects in the VMFA collection. For example, letters in the collection shed light on Pratt's collecting activities and, as well as on her relationship with one of her dealers, Alexander Schaffer; both of these factors would influence which objects were ultimately included in her collection. While the pilot project was successful, it offered a number of challenges that highlighted the difficulty often encountered when attempting to digitally represent connections between ideas, primary source materials, and objects. A major result of the project is the dissemination vehicle for the archival materials: the website [The Lillian Thomas Pratt Archives and Fabergé at VMFA](#). Though project staff had originally planned to make the archives accessible via the online Collection Search on the VMFA website, the creation of the Pratt collection website interface ultimately provided better access not only to the digitized content, but also to other related research tools in one cohesive resource.

## **Project Activities**

Over the course of the two years of the project (May 2015-May 2017), VMFA was able to successfully develop the technical requirements and workflow for disseminating digitized archival content on the web, and design a framework to relate primary source materials to objects in the museum's art collection. The first step was to hire a full-time Archivist for the first time in the museum's history. The selected candidate had previously served as the part-time Archivist at the museum and therefore was extremely familiar with the collections and possessed first-hand

institutional knowledge. With the conclusion of the grant period, the full-time Archivist position is now supported by the museum's operating budget and will remain a staff position permanently.

Prior to digitization, the Archivist surveyed and inventoried additional resources related to the Pratt collection. This survey included consultation with a number of museum departments outside the Library and Archives where Pratt-related materials were located, including the Curatorial Object Files, Photographic Resources Archive, and Conservation offices, as well as early museum records held at the Library of Virginia. The collection finding aid was enhanced with information about the related resources and the collection inventory was amended to include a newly discovered cache of Schaffer Collection descriptions that had been located in the Curatorial files. The project team then reviewed the list of possible additional materials to digitize and determined two digitization priorities that focused on the collection herself: Mrs. Pratt's personal effects (mainly books and catalogs that she owned) and documentation created as a direct result of the donation in 1947.

The next step was to bring in two consultants to advise museum staff. Lyrasis consultant Leigh Grinstead completed an intensive three-day site visit during which she toured the facilities and met with staff to review the collections in the Library and Archives, Curatorial offices, Conservation offices, and the Photographic Resources Archive. She met with the Imaging Resources department to assess their equipment and technical processes and workflows, as well as with the Education department staff to discuss how the museum's primary source material can be best utilized for educational purposes. Finally, she met with IT staff to evaluate the museum's technical infrastructure. Ms. Grinstead and Library of Virginia consultant Deanna Chavez also conducted a half-day session for staff on cataloging, metadata standards and best practices. Later that fall, Ms. Grinstead submitted her final report to VMFA which offered observations, addressed concerns, and proposed solutions related to the museum's technical infrastructure, planning infrastructure, metadata standards and best practices, digital preservation, and audience outreach.

Before work on the digitization component of the pilot project could begin in earnest, the Archivist drafted a detailed 27-step project plan to complete the work of the grant. The scope of work was divided into three phases: planning, digitization, and implementation. Each step detailed the responsible staff members and projected timeline for the project. To keep the project team on track, the Archivist updated and reviewed the project plan quarterly.

Over the next three months, the Archivist pulled, catalogued and prepped all 729 items selected for digitization, including all of the items in the Pratt archives, books from Pratt's personal library, estate documents from the Curatorial files, and early photographs from the Photographic Archives. The original metadata schema designed by the Archivist was based upon the Dublin Core (DC) standard. However, when it came time to map the DC elements to metadata fields in Piction (VMFA's digital asset management system), it became apparent that the inherent flexibility of DC created problems because Piction requires a "one-to-one" rather than a "one-to-many" relationship in its metadata architecture. This informed the decision to ultimately use Encoded Archival Description (EAD) metadata standard, which mapped more cleanly to Piction and was also much more useful when repurposing the metadata to create the EAD finding aid. In addition, Piction has the ability to export metadata as DC, so it could still easily be applied to

other shared data applications, such as the Digital Public Library of America, in the future.

Digitization was completed over the following six months, resulting in 2,838 new digital assets (1,419 master TIFF files and 1,419 derivative JPG files) with 24 fields of associated EAD compliant metadata and additional technical metadata added during the digitization process. Originally, the grant application assumed that the museum would hire a part-time Image Resources Technician to assist with post-production image processing, create metadata for all of the image files and link images to the appropriate records in Piction. However, it became clear that all of that work could be subsumed by current staff members at the museum who regularly performed similar duties for data and photography related to objects in the art collection. The metadata creation became part of the Archivist's cataloging and description work; the Assistant Photographer handled the post-production image processing; and the Imaging Resources Coordinator oversaw the ingestion of the assets into Piction and linked the images to the appropriate data records.

Once the assets were available in Piction, the intention was to make them publically available through the museum's Collections Search site. However, the decision was made to move forward with a custom microsite to disseminate the Pratt content in accordance with the grant timeline. The Archivist and the museum's Digital Learning Coordinator began working with a local web developer to create the website [The Lillian Thomas Pratt Archives and Fabergé at VMFA](#). As a result of this collaboration between the Library and Archives and the Education Department, the website is more comprehensive than originally intended and is dedicated to numerous digital resources about Fabergé and Russian decorative arts. The site features a landing page with information about Mrs. Pratt to provide contextual information for the archival collection as well as access to the digitized archive, newly filmed videos of the Imperial Easter Eggs opening, new 360° views of the Imperial Easter Eggs, digitized rare books, and downloadable resources for educators. The website was built upon the WordPress platform and pulls images and associated metadata directly from Piction.

VMFA was committed to publishing the content online in a way that would meaningfully connect the digital objects to the finding aid. The resulting custom user interface highlights the finding aid just as much as the digitized collection, something that's not currently available in any off-the-shelf or open source archival software packages. The components of the finding aid were parsed out in a way that would make sense to both a seasoned archives researcher and a casual website visitor. The collection's homepage features three tabs: "Collection Overview," "Finding Aid," and "Collection Viewer." The "Collection Viewer" includes the digitized images and associated metadata, but also has a breadcrumb bar along the top of the page that allows users to navigate through the collection in a hierarchical manner, mimicking the organization of a traditional finding aid.

The museum added a section to the bottom of the homepage called "Browse the Archives" which allows users to see a selection of items based upon their genre, including "Photography and Drawings," "Rare Books," and "Invoices and Price Tags." This addition was driven by two motives. First, the museum wanted the site to appeal to a more casual audience that might be interested in some of the most popular pieces in the collection: the photographs. Second, the museum wanted to provide quick access to those items that were most requested by Fabergé

scholars: the dealer invoices and price tags. In addition, a general keyword search was added to enable searching across the entire collection.

As previously mentioned, VMFA originally intended the archive to be available through the museum's Collections Search site, which would have enabled archival documents to link directly to object records from the art collection to further enhance the user's experience and understanding of the Fabergé collection. Unfortunately, that functionality was not possible through the standalone microsite that was developed. However, the design of the custom user interface for the microsite will be reused for the archives component of the new Collections Search site (currently in development), and will finally realize the institutional goal of directly connecting art objects to primary source documentation.

Overall, the entire project plan was expected to be completed within one year. However, an extended leave of the Archivist compounded with the unexpected change in the dissemination vehicle (leading to the creation of the microsite) extended the project for an additional year.

VMFA issued a dedicated press release on October 12, 2016, to publicize the launch of the website. The museum also included information about the digitization in an earlier press release (July 12, 2016) about the opening of new galleries for the Fabergé collection to make the public aware about the upcoming website launch. The Archivist and Director of the Library sent announcements to relevant listservs (SAA, SAA Museum Section, MARAC, VIVA, ARLIS/NA, and RBMS) and blogs ([Virginia Heritage](#) and [ARLIS/NA Mid-Atlantic](#)) and wrote two articles about the project that were published in the Summer/Fall 2016 and Winter 2016 issues of the "[Fabergé Newsletter](#)." To make the collection more discoverable, an EAD finding aid was created and published to the national union database of finding aids, ArchiveGrid, and to the state's union database, Virginia Heritage. Plans to contribute the archive to ARTstor were not realized because VMFA had since determined that the institutional priority for populating its ARTstor collection would be images of the art collection.

Finally, after the website launched, the Archivist worked towards compiling a priority list for digitization over the next five years. The Archives contains 60 collections, divided between institutional records and donated or acquired records, and each type of collection has challenges related to digitization. Institutional records are largely unprocessed and often contain materials that are restricted by Virginia law, however these restrictions generally only apply to textual records, leaving photographic, audiovisual and published materials available for digitization. While the Archives attempts to gain copyright transfers or licenses during the donation or acquisition process, doing so is not always possible or even feasible. However, the Archives does possess several collections for which available copyrights were transferred or licensed, making them ready for digitization.

Focusing on the parameters outlined above, and incorporating other institutional strategic goals, the digitization priority list identified four major initiatives. The scope of these projects includes items from nine Archives collections, as well as archival documentation from three other museum departments (Photographic Resources, Curatorial and Conservation). The document was approved by the project team and will serve as a resource allocation roadmap for the museum, giving direction and purpose to its digitization strategy.

## **Project Evaluation**

Six months after the website launched, a variety of statistics were pulled from Google Analytics. Overall usage, demographics, technology, and behavior were all analyzed, including a comparison of changes from day-30 usage to day-180 usage.

The site had been viewed by 3,927 users, retaining 25.0% of returning visitors and gaining 75.0% new visitors. The difference between online visitor gender identification was relatively insignificant, with 45.9% reporting as female and 54.1% reporting as male. The two main age groups were under 35 years old (27.5% were 18-24 and 33.5% were 25-34) while only 11% of visitors online were over 55 years old. This was significant because the typical on-site museum visitor with an interest in Fabergé and Russian decorative arts identifies as over age 55, so the digitized archive is actively engaging a new, younger demographic. Consistent with current market trends of browser usage, the vast majority of visitors (78.4%) used Chrome or Safari as their browser, versus only 7.7% of Internet Explorer users. This finding validates the web developer's efforts to test the microsite they designed in all of those browsers, and to perform additional, more detailed testing in Chrome.

The results of the geographic make-up of the online visitors were expected and demonstrate a need for improved marketing of the resource outside of Virginia. Of the top ten locations reported, seven are from the greater Richmond area, representing 40.4% of overall sessions. Saint Petersburg and New York comprise a mere 4.0% by comparison. However, Russia was the second most highly reported country at 4.4% (the United States was reported as 85.7%). English was the most highly represented language at 87.6%, with Dutch, Russian, Spanish and German comprising the rest of the top ten languages reported.

There had been 5,241 sessions, with 13,831 total pageviews, and 9,936 unique pageviews, averaging about 2,300 pageviews per month. The peak usage day was October 20, 2016, the same day that VMFA emailed an announcement about the site to its mailing list, confirming that direct marketing about the site from the museum results in actual page visitation. The average pages per session was 2.64 which is above target for the industry standard average of 2 pages. The average session duration was 2 minutes and 42 seconds, which is also above target for the industry standard average of 2 minutes and 30 seconds. The longer sessions reported were over six and seven minutes long, with the longest session at 7 minutes and 20 seconds.

The website was developed with a "mobile first" design in mind, and analytics proved this to be a valid strategy. Of the 5,241 total sessions, 2,222 of them (or 42.4%) were accessed using a mobile device or tablet (almost exclusively iOS and Android platforms).

Expectedly, the most frequently visited page was the homepage with 43.0% of the total pageviews, however, the digitized archive was the second most frequently visited page with 10.3% of the total pageviews. This was a change from the analytics dataset reviewed after the first 30 days, where the video section of the website was the second most popular page (now 3.3% of total pageviews). The finding aid page is still the most frequently visited page in the digitized archive, with 3.4% of the total pageviews. It was gratifying to see that two of the

“browse archives” features that were added to the homepage were reported in the top ten most frequently viewed pages, as VMFA plans to make guided browsing a strong feature of the forthcoming Collections Search site.

The public has been very supportive of the project and researchers have been eager to dive into the material. Since the website was launched, three international scholars (one from Denmark and two from Germany) used one of the documents from the digitized archive as a starting point to collaboratively piece together a full history of the painted miniatures inside the museum's 1896 Imperial Easter Egg. An essay detailing how their research unfolded appeared in the Spring/Summer 2017 issue of the "[Fabergé Newsletter](#)" and included an image of the document from the archive that sparked their project.

Regular museum visitors who have enjoyed the Fabergé collection on-site for many years consistently report being surprised by the archive, as they had never known Pratt's papers are located at the museum. In November 2016, three museum staff members (the Director of the Library, the Archivist, and the Curator of Decorative Arts) together presented a new lecture entitled, "Discovering and Documenting Stories: Connecting Fabergé and Russian Decorative Arts to Special Collections." Attended by over 80 people, the lecture used materials from the digitized archive to reveal stories about Mrs. Pratt and the formation of her collection. The audience delighted in seeing actual documents that made statements such as, "these icons were made for the last Czar, Nicholai II, and were found in his quarters in the Alexander Palace" paired with images of Mrs. Pratt's own bedroom in her "palace" in Fredericksburg, Virginia, thousands of miles away from the where the Romanovs lived.

All of this positive feedback and confirmation of the value of the museum's primary resources has only served to increase VMFA's institutional commitment to making these materials more widely accessible online, in publications, and to visitors and members.

### **Project Continuation**

After the website's launch, VMFA staff committed to making the archives more accessible to visually impaired users and are currently working towards making the digitized archive compatible for use with screen reading software. As a first step, the Archivist is working with volunteers to create transcriptions of the letters, the text of which will be made available as metadata in the forthcoming Collections Search site. The next step will be to devise a keyword schema that can be applied to the photographs as metadata tags that can both describe the image and enhance searchability. Finally, the museum will experiment with different platforms to generate both automated OCR and manual transcriptions of the hundreds of other documents in the archive.

The launch of the website also has opened possibilities for both private and public collaborations. The heirs of Alexander and Ray Schaffer, Mrs. Pratt's most trusted art dealers, still own much of Mrs. Pratt's correspondence with the Schaffers. The Director of the Library has begun discussions with the family about allowing the museum to digitize her letters and reunite both sides of the correspondence online. Doing so would tell the other half of the story of how her collection was formed and how their friendship developed. The Director of the Library has



also spoken with staff at the Hillwood Estate, Museum and Garden and the Cleveland Museum of Art to work towards a digital collaboration to explore the story of two other early 20th-century female Fabergé collectors alongside Mrs. Pratt—Marjorie Merriweather Post and India Early Minshall.

The museum's Education Department has used more than 120 digitized items from the archive to create a creative toolkit for teachers called "Collecting Art." This toolkit uses personal letters, tax records, bills of sale, and other data to investigate the economics of collecting art from 1934 to the present day. The tools provided allow teachers to create a range of lesson plans and problem sets that challenge students' math skills, logic skills, historical knowledge, and creativity.

Digitized materials from the archive were also used throughout the museum's "Fabergé at VMFA" app, which was designed to inform and engage visitors in a new and interactive way. Available for mobile devices and tablets, the app sheds light on the many stories behind the collection, including the rise of Fabergé and his workshop, the tragic fall of the Romanovs, and Mrs. Pratt's keen collecting eye. For families, it features a fairytale pathway that tells the story of Ivan and the Gray Wolf using images from Russian folktale books in VMFA's Rare Books collection. The app also includes a Fabergé egg "workshop" where users can design and share their very own eggs. The app is available for free in the [Apple App Store](#) and on [Google Play](#).

These uses of historical documents and primary source materials in new resources have created a desire for more partnerships between the Library and Archives and other museum departments, including Education, Curatorial and Marketing. It has also helped strengthen the commitment of museum leadership to expand the museum's digital collections. In March 2017, the museum was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Collections and Reference Resources Implementations grant in the amount of \$173,833 to digitize, preserve and share its over 50,000 item archive of documents, photographs, negatives and other materials from Richmond-born photographer Louis Draper (1935–2002). Work began on that project in July 2017, and all of the workflows, standards and project outcomes developed for the Implementations project were informed by the work completed during this pilot digitization project.

Finally, the museum is actively seeking funding to support a plan to digitize and disseminate the entire contents of the museum's archives that are held at the Library of Virginia. This project would provide unprecedented insight into the history of the nation's first state-supported art museum through almost 40,000 full-text searchable documents as well as five digital exhibitions related to significant historical topics, including: Segregation during the time of Massive Resistance; Female Leadership from WWII through the 1960s; Fellowship Awards Supporting Virginia's Artists (Cy Twombly, Benjamin Wigfall and Julien Binfond); VMFA's Artmobile: Bringing Arts Education to Virginia's Rural Communities; and Landmark Exhibitions. These initiatives continue to build upon the strong foundations that were laid through the "Uncovering Fabergé: An Archival Digitization Planning and Pilot Project."